

A HEADREST FROM THE ADZERA, MOROBE PROVINCE, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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ABSTRACT

A recently acquired headrest from the 19th century has been attributed to the Adzera speakers of Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea. Extant data on the Adzera is sparse, but establishes the position of the headrests within the cannibalistic cult that prevailed at the time. This paper considers the available data within a structuralist framework.

KEYWORDS: Papua New Guinea, Adzera, material culture.

This fine example of wooden headrest from Papua New Guinea (Fig. 1) was recently purchased by the Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory. Its history noted that it had been collected from the Huon Gulf area and had been in German hands since the turn of the century. It was brought to Australia in 1962. By comparison with an example in the National Museum of Papua New Guinea, and from illustrations in published sources (Schmitz 1959; Gathercole, Kaeppler and Newton 1979) the headrest has been identified as originating from the Adzera speakers of the middle Markham Valley, Morobe Province.

Adzera headrests have been illustrated from the Rautenstrauch Joest Museum in Cologne, the Missions-Museum at Neuen-dettelsau and K. Holzkmacht's private collection (Schmitz 1959), the Peabody Museum of Salem (Gathercole *et al.* 1979) and the Canterbury Museum (unprovenanced in Brake *et al.* 1979). Of these ten examples, only that at the Canterbury Museum has the head oriented downwards, as with the NT Museum example. These two also have in common the marking of leg or arm bands — on the two front legs of the Canterbury example and on all three in the NT Museum headrest. The circular head-piece or 'cap' is common to all the headrests, but the NT Museum example does not have the pair of protruding knobs that Schmitz (1959:153-4) suggests may represent the feather ornaments worn on the successful head-hunter's cap. The NT Museum example is further distinguished by protruding nipples and navel, and by the lack of any representation of genitalia — in

contrast to the Canterbury Museum's example with its fully erect penis.

The Adzera are a group of 20 000 people living in the middle to upper Markham Valley, between the Leron and Ramu Rivers. They are Austronesian speakers and most widely known for their fine pottery (Holzknecht 1956, 1957; May and Tuckson 1982) that is widely traded and still used as bride payment in some areas. Little, however, has been recorded of the Adzera's earlier traditions involving the wooden headrests. Schmitz (1959) gave an interpretation of the use and meaning of the headrests within a cannibalistic and head-hunting cult, based upon comments made by descendants of the last of the headhunters, and from scraps of data recorded by missionaries and other travellers. From these records and his more extensive knowledge of the Adzera's neighbours, Schmitz (1959: 157-9) pieced together an explication of the cannibal cult and a role of the headrests within it. He believed that there were two classes of object — the headrest and the ceremonial chair or stool. He noted that both classes were very similar in appearance, and it is not possible, from his illustrations, to distinguish one class from another by physical characteristics. Instead, Schmitz based his distinction between the two classes solely on the recorded purpose for which the three legged objects were used. During the night prior to a headhunting raid the warriors would sleep prone with the nape of the neck resting on the back of the artefact, in effect using it as a headrest. Upon return from a fruitful raid, the successful warrior would sit upon the



Fig. 1. Headrest. Adzera speakers, Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea. 19th century. Reg. No. NGE 826. 63 x 29.5 x 29.5 cm.

three-legged object (that Schmitz now called a ceremonial stool), apart from his companions, and would eat pig-meat while his fellows ate the flesh of the human victim.

The characteristic face of the headrests, Schmitz noted, was also that of the large vertical wooden figures of the mythic figure Mugus that were found in the men's houses of the Adzera and other neighbouring cannibalistic groups. The myth of the male sky-god Mugus, pig-owner and with a lust for human flesh, was recorded by Schmitz from a number of places in the areas surrounding the Finisterre and Saruwaged Ranges (1963:149). Central elements to this myth are the devastation caused by this monstrous god; his counterpart, an earth-mother figure who magically gave birth to twin sons (one right handed, the other left); and the ultimate slaying of this monster by the twins, who sit upon his corpse in triumph. Schmitz suggested that, in the cannibalistic and headhunting cult, each victim 'played' the role of the male man-eating god who was killed and devoured.

From Schmitz' necessarily brief exegesis, we can see that the headrests had a context within the cannibalistic subculture where myth and artefact were represented as metaphors for each other. It is in this

equation that we can explore a further aspect of the relationship between these artefacts and Adzera cannibalism. Understood not as utilitarian headrest or stool, but as a device for opening and closing a ritual mythic phase, the two classes of artefact become one, signifying entry and exit. In this context, the three legged support operated as the gateway to the non-normal mythic-based condition of cannibal. The warrior lay prone, resting the nape of his neck upon the artefact prior to behaving as a cannibal in a non-normal social state. Upon his successful return he then sat vertically upon the artefact, resting his genitalia prior to his re-entry to normal life as a pig-eater. In this interpretation, the headrest/ceremonial stool is the bridge that carried men from a normal non-cannibal state through to the cannibalistic life depicted in the Mugus myth, then back again to normal non-mythic life.

From this point we can also clarify the 'power' attributed to the headrests. As vehicles for entry and exit into the mythic world of cannibalism, the power of the headrests was that of the key to a normally forbidden world. The headrests, in the two contexts of their use, indicated to both the users and other warriors that a transforma-

tion was taking place. When the head was supported the user was entering the world of the immortal and mythic man-eater; when the genitalia were supported he was returning to the world of reproduction and mortality.

This reinterpretation of the ethno-graphic data may not enhance the extraordinary beauty of the headrest, but instead shed some light on the 'meaning' of the headrest's existence, its strikingly ambiguous lines, and the 'power' carried by this type of artefact.

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